

CHAPTER I

THE MURNGIN

THE northern shores of Australia are separated in the east from New Guinea by the Torres Strait and the Gulf of Carpentaria, and in the west by the shallow Sea of Arafura. The Indian Ocean lies between Australia and the East Indian island of Timor. Below the Arafura is Arnhem Land, that almost blank space on the map which extends from the Gulf of Carpentaria to the Indian Ocean. In the furthestmost northern and eastern parts of this latter region are several tribes which may be referred to collectively as the Murngin. Their ancestors lived here many hundreds and probably thousands of years before them.¹

Eastern and northern Arnhem Land are unpopulated by whites except for a half dozen or more missionaries who are stationed at three comparatively recent Christian outposts. Traders infrequently sail their two-masted luggers into the shallow harbors and mouths of the tidal rivers to exchange their goods with the natives; all other economic efforts have been unprofitable. On the southern borders of this huge territory white civilization is making a melancholy and fruitless effort to implant its own markings in the form of cattle ranches on the bleak country that lies along the southern banks of the Roper River. A telegraph system which unites white Australia with the rest of the British Empire stretches from the populous cities of southern Australia across the barren central desert into the western border of Arnhem Land and terminates at the tiny, isolated town of Port Darwin.

The Murngin live some ten to fifteen degrees south of the equator in a land which has little elevation. The climate is tropical and marked by the sharp, seasonal cycles of the rainy and dry periods, with corresponding changes in the prevailing winds or monsoons. The long flat coastal regions have a savanna type of vegetation, with the ubiquitous mangrove here and there forming dense jungle groves along the flat sandy islands, bays, and tidal rivers. The groves of ti trees in this region are green oases which the native sees as he journeys in from the barren

¹ See Appendix I, Social Change in North Australia.

A BLACK CIVILIZATION

133 alkaline plains and approaches the marshy lakes that are abundantly
 137 present in the rainy season and frequently absent in the dry period.
 The acacia and the eucalyptus are familiar and frequent in both the
 low and the high lands, and spear grass covers the land in dense
 growths during the months of rain.

136 The animals, with certain minor variations, are the usual marsupials
 and monotremes found in Australia, with the bat and wild domestic
 dog the only mammalia living in the region. Nature is bountiful with

[136] many varieties of birds, fish, and other animals; but vegetable foods,
 although plentiful, are limited in variety.

144 The Murngin people belong to the aboriginal Australoid race found
 throughout Australia—not Mongoloid, Negroid, or Caucasian, but a
 variant group which seems to be a blend of many of the features of the

[144] white and black races.² Their language is one of the Australo-Dravidian
 linguistic group. They belong to a Stone Age culture; were they placed
 105 in our own chronology, their technological development would fall
 somewhere between the Old and the New Stone Ages.

The Murngin civilization is a simple Australian culture with a small
 hunting and gathering population which lives off the sea and the land.
 The natural environment which surrounds it and drastically affects
 native behavior consists of *two changes which make up the yearly
 cycle*; one of these is extremely rainy, producing a period of scarcity,
 and the other a dry period when there is an abundance of food. The
 technology can be described briefly as the adaptive mechanisms of the
 general society to these two parts of the cycle of nature.

614 The social organization must be given in a more detailed descrip-
 423 tion. The fundamental basis of the society is an elaborate kinship³
 system in which everyone is related to everyone else. This kinship sys-
 tem is organized into more general units which are patrilineal,³ exo-
 gamic³ clans³ which have local territories that were "given to them by
 the totems."³ All parts of the clan land have totemic references. Each
 clan has multiple totems; all clans have at least one, possibly more,
 sacred water holes where live the high totems, the totemic ancestors,
 the ancestral dead, and the totemic spirits of the unborn. The names
 of all clansmen have totemic significance, and the whole general
 totemic pattern is related to the clan.

[101] ² See Appendix VII.—The term "Black" in the title of this book, *A Black Civilization*,
 is not to be interpreted as describing these people as purely Negroid. The term refers,
 rather, to their popular name, "Australian Blacks," and to the name they accept for
 themselves from the Australian whites, "Blackfellows."

³ See Glossary of Technical Terms, page 566.

THE WAWILAK CONFIGURATION AND THE SEASONAL CYCLE

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773 Throughout the native interpretation in which the Wawilak myth and the four rituals are connected point by point and integrated, there is a continual association of the rain and flood with the python which gives us a clue to the wider meaning of the python symbol to the Murngin. The Murngin definitely associate the Wawilak python with the weather and seasonal change. The climatic ideas which surround the python are not latent but conscious and manifest in Murngin thinking. Here we shall examine the python as a weather symbol.

132 The outstanding general natural phenomena are the great seasonal changes which produce heavy rainfall and floods for five months, and for seven months an extremely dry season in which there is no rain and many of the streams, lakes, water holes and inlets dry up. Correlated with this cycle of rainy and dry seasons are the attendant phenomena of changing winds and clouds, greater and less heat, growth and decay of vegetation, birth and growth of the different species of animals, and the appearance of certain birds and insects and the disappearance of others. There is constant need of drastic change in the adaptation of the Murngin economics and technology to fit the constantly changing natural environment.

● 133 The other fundamental natural phenomenon which is always dramatically before one's eyes is the relation of the land to the ocean, tidal lakes, and rivers. The great tides pour inland for scores of miles, reaching into the flat coastal plains which stretch back to the broken and difficult highlands in the interior. The flat coast land is continuous along the Sea of Arafura and the Gulf of Carpentaria.

823 The Murngin have a most accurate knowledge of the locational, seasonal, and daily variation of the tides. Anyone who has taken a canoe trip with them along the seacoast quickly learns that this knowledge is immense in detail, well organized, and held by all the men. To the Murngin mind the flow of the tide into the Murngin land stands in opposition to the flow of the rivers, particularly at flood time during the rainy season. The reason is obvious when we realize the great heights of the incoming tide and the tremendous flow of flood water which goes to the sea during the rainy season.

133 The central plain which extends from thirty-five to sixty miles inland at sea level is composed of Tertiary deposits which have produced
134 a very poor soil. Inland the altitude increases from several hundred to a thousand feet. Arnhem Land's highest point (to the west and
000 south of the Murngin) is said to be only 1500 feet high. Because of

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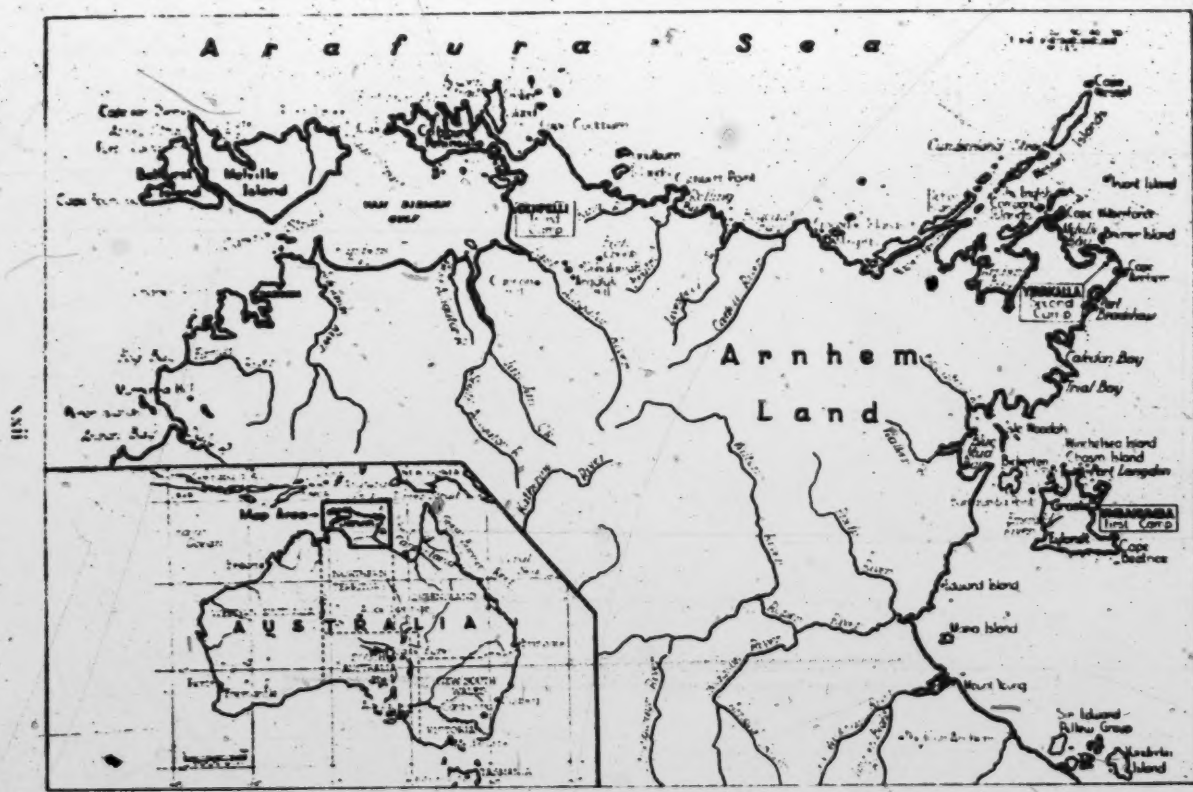


FIG. 1. Arnhem Land, showing expedition camps

3: Mountford E-5 (1948) 1956

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THE STORY OF THE EXPEDITION

But not for long. On 5 May Hassett-Smith, who had by then succeeded in getting his wireless set to work as a receiver, intercepted a message from Johnson, saying that the barge *Phoenix* was on a reef in Boucaut Bay,⁵ but that the staff and supplies were safe. Knowing that a spell of rough weather would break up the ancient barge I arranged with Fred Gray to take us to the wreck, about three hundred miles distant, in his little 33-foot launch, and, if necessary, bring back the members of our party with what scientific equipment we could salvage.

For five days our little craft battled against heavy seas to reach the barge. When we arrived at Mililinginbi, in the Crocodile Islands, we saw, to our great relief, the *Phoenix* unloading cargo with her flat bottom resting on the mud.⁶ She had floated off the reef on the high tide of the previous day. Finding our supplies were safe and the staff well, we loaded up some of the scientific instruments and equipment (we were not short of food in the main camp) and, taking Deignan with us, set out for Umbakumba. It took six days to return to Groote Eylandt, the weather conditions being even worse than on the outward journey, and on 24 May, six days after our arrival and five weeks after her scheduled time, the *Phoenix* entered Little Lagoon with the supplies for which we had waited so long.

With all the party together and ample supplies, work started in earnest. Billington and Hodges, having finished their medical examination of the aborigines at Umbakumba, moved to the mission station on the Angotoko River; Miss McArthur, who had already completed one nutritional camp at Hemple Bay, established another at Bickerton Island, accompanied by Specht, the botanist, and Howard Coates, an officer of the Native Affairs Branch; while Seutler and McCarthy spent a few days at Winchelsea Island, excavating Malay graves. Later, McCarthy examined cave paintings within the area. In general, the naturalists did most of their collecting around the main camp.

My duties as leader kept me, for most of the time, in the main camp. I was able, however, to make a brief stay at Bickerton Island, visit totemic places along the west coast of Groote Eylandt and, with McCarthy and others, examine the cave paintings at Chasm Island which had been discovered by Flinders in 1803. I was also able to view a totemic ceremony of which, previously, we had little knowledge.

The late arrival of the *Phoenix* necessitated the abandonment of the Roper River camp. But the added length of stay at Groote Eylandt was advantageous, because it allowed members of the party to increase their knowledge and natural history collections of this interesting island environment.

After fourteen weeks at Groote Eylandt a Catalina flying-boat and a mission launch moved the party to Yirrkalla. This was by far the most pleasant of all our camps. We pitched our tents on the crown of a sandhill carpeted with a mat of thick grass, a welcome change after the soft sand of Umbakumba. Before us was an open curving beach, on which the waves thundered day and night, and

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behind us a fresh-water swamp, shaded by large trees, fringed with luxuriant grasses and intersected with a stream of clear water. The weather, too, was at its best. The mists of morning gave way to warm dry days, while the nights were chilly and refreshing. As we sat at meals we could look across the tumbling waters and watch the aboriginal children at play, shooting the breakers in their small canoes, spearing fish, or drawing pictures in the glistening sands.

The day after reaching Yirrkalla, we received a pleasant surprise in the form of a visit from the American Consul for South Australia, Mr E. Selbert, who had made the journey to see his American colleagues; the Administrator for the Northern Territory, Mr A. R. Driver; and the Director-General of Information, Mr Kevin Murphy.

The only change of staff happened at Yirrkalla. Gordon, the transport officer, returned to Adelaide because of sickness in his family. Bray became transport officer and the position as cook was filled by Reginald Hollow.

We had no sooner settled in our camp than the Northern Territory patrol launch *Kurn* visited us. With it came W. E. Harney to act as guide to the expedition. Harney's knowledge of Arnhem Land, especially of the Gulf of Carpentaria, is extensive; of the aboriginal people, deep and understanding; and of the fauna and flora, considerable. As a story-teller and singer, Harney entertained us, individually and collectively, for hours with his tales of cattle thieves, droving and journeys with the aborigines. Merely stopping to pick up Miss McArthur, Miller, Setzler, McCarthy and Harney, the *Kurn* continued her journey to Port Bradshaw, where Setzler dug out more Malay graves, Miller caught fish by line, poison and net, and McCarthy and Harney examined a small group of cave paintings at Jelangbara. Miss McArthur had asked to be allowed to establish a nutrition camp, with no other companions but her two aboriginal interpreters, a man and his wife, claiming that she could get a truer picture of the aborigines in their natural environment if she were by herself.

On the return of the party from Port Bradshaw, Setzler and McCarthy flew to Milingimbi to carry out archaeological research, whilst the remainder of the scientists concentrated on their own special interests near the base camp. During this time, the botanist, mammalogist, ornithologist, and particularly the ichthyologist added greatly to their collections. Billington and Hodges set up their nutrition laboratory in the mission hospital, a much more comfortable place for work than Umbakumba. Bassett-Smith and I photographed many aspects of aboriginal life on colour cine film. The aboriginal men also produced for me many unusual bark paintings as well as carved and painted figures.

But again sea transport troubles arose. During the period of the Yirrkalla camp I had flown into Darwin and arranged with some Chinese merchants to send their forty-ton landing barge *Triumph* to Yirrkalla, load all the gear and, with members of the party aboard, take the barge around the north coast and up the East Alligator River to our next camp at Oenpelli, a journey of about six hundred miles. Although the journey would not have been comfortable, this

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once the camp of *Djungkoo* and his sister. The aborigines pointed out that, because *Djungkoo* and *Madalaït* were brother and sister, their camps were some distance apart. 773* 532*

At *a* is the lizard *tjunda* resting under one of the *muringja* (casuarina) trees created by *Djungkoo*. The groups of parallel lines on either side of the lizard indicate again the lines of soft sand which ran from under its feet as it walked along the crest of the sand-hill.

Plate 86C is more or less a duplicate of Pl. 85F. It is included because of the attractive design and fine brush work. The meanings are similar, the upper panel representing the sunrise, the lower right the parallel sand-hills, and the lower left the lizard, *tjunda*, at *Jelanghara*.

Djungkoo and the Lizard, Tjunda

Plate 85B pictures the lizard, *tjunda*, associated with *Djungkoo*, at a *dua* totemic place at Arnhem Bay. The painting is figured because it is an example of how the different language groups illustrate similar subjects. The language group, or *mata*, of Port Bradshaw pictures the running sand design on either side of the lizard, *tjunda*,³⁷ while the members of the *kapin mata* of Arnhem Bay modify the design by replacing the running sand design with that of the leaves of the *darna* palm leaf.³⁸ The tracks are those of the swamp-bird, *buorta*.³⁹

Djungkoo and Madalaït at Arnhem Bay

When *Djungkoo* and *Madalaït* reached Arnhem Bay, *Djungkoo* pushed his digging sticks into the ground and created many fresh-water springs. When the water started to rise *Djungkoo* told his sister that the wells would be sacred and that she would be in charge.

Plate 87C pictures the open plain and swamp country near Arnhem Bay, some of which is periodically covered by the sea. The small circles at the junctions of the straight lines are the springs created by *Djungkoo*, the diagonal lines the channels made in the mud of the mangrove swamps by the water flowing from the sacred wells, and the footmarks those of a mangrove curlew (*Numenius madagascariensis*).⁴⁰ [133]•

The Djungkoo Sisters at Milnigarak

This myth refers to the two *Djungkoo* sisters⁴¹ at the Milnigarak waterhole, situated on the Napier Peninsula, south of Elcho Island. In mythical times the two sisters, after travelling extensively over the surrounding country and naming 776* 773* 532*

37. *Mata* design, Fig. 61D.

38. *Mata* design, Fig. 61E.

39. The tracks of the same bird are present on the music stick of *Madalaït*, Pl. 133F, F, and on the painted coffin, Pl. 102A.

40. This is the design of the *Naimersi mata* of Arnhem Bay, Fig. 61C.

41. As mentioned earlier, p. 269, the *Djungkoo* group changed from a brother and sister to two sisters as the myth moved westward.

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The Totemic Place, Jalboa, of the Thunder-man, Tjambuwal

About four miles north-west of Yirrkalla is a short headland, from the point of which a small reef extends into the sea. This headland, called Jalboa, is the totemic place of the thunder-man, *Tjambuwal* (Fig. 57).

On its southern end the distorted rock strata of the cliff have formed into a number of more or less vertical irregular gutters which, according to the myth, are made when *Tjambuwal* urinates. On the point of the cliff about fifty yards to the north are the rocks which are shattered by *Tjambuwal* (Pl. 91E) when he strikes them with his club, *burumunda*, and on its slopes a number of white stones, *mlarik* (Pl. 91F). It is these, or the spirits of them, which *Tjambuwal* throws into the sky to make thunder-clouds.⁶⁹

On the adjacent beach are two small casuarina trees (Pl. 91A), once the bodies of *Tjambuwal* and his relatives. Not far from these casuarinas is a large fig tree (Pl. 91B), the transformed body of another of *Tjambuwal's* relatives. The fruit of this fig tree is sacred, as indeed is the whole area at the base of the cliff. No one would dare to eat that fruit, for he would surely die, nor would he dig for ochre in the base of the cliff for, if he did, *Tjambuwal* would kill him. Should the women even look at the place where *Tjambuwal* urinated they must atone for their misdeeds by a gift of food to the members of the thunder-man's totem. If not, *Tjambuwal* will make them ill.

*The Thunder-man, Bolugo (or Tjambuwal) at Wulwulwi,
Koolatong River*

This version of the *Tjambuwal* myth places the totemic site at Wulwulwi, on the Koolatong River. The myth differs slightly in detail, but not in general form, from that at Yirrkalla; *Tjambuwal* becomes *Bolugo*;⁷⁰ the looped clouds, *wulmu*, become *djalijal*; and *Bolugo* urinates from a high tree,⁷¹ instead of, as in the *Tjambuwal* myth, from the clouds.⁷²

On the middle panel of Pl. 89B is *Bolugo* urinating on the ground beneath. This urine later rises into the sky and becomes rain. There is a line of hailstones, *mlarik* (shown as ovals) to the right of *Bolugo*, and looped clouds, *djalijal*, above his head. The series of squares⁷³ on either side of *Bolugo* symbolize the open sea near Wulwulwi.

The Thunder-man, Tjambuwal, at Naitjulma, Arnhem Bay

When the thunder-man, *Tjambuwal*, was camped at Naitjulma, Arnhem Bay, two of his sons died and their bodies were transformed into white stones, called *mlarik* or *jarambai*. At the beginning of the wet season the thunder-man throws

69. See bark paintings of *Bolugo*, Pl. 89B.

70. Ekin and the *Beandis* (1946), p. 41, refer to the thunder-man under the name of *Bolugo*.

71. See myth of *Bolugo* on canvas, p. 393.

72. See myth of *Tjambuwal*, p. 262.

73. This is the design belonging to the *dua tjapu maku* of Caledon Bay language group (Fig. 63A).

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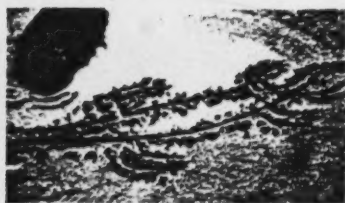


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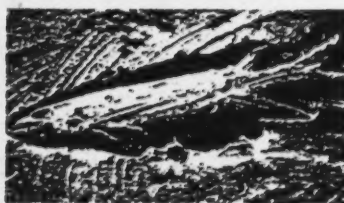


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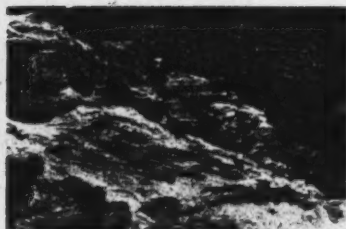


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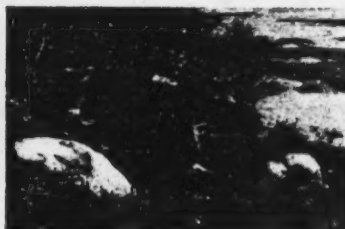


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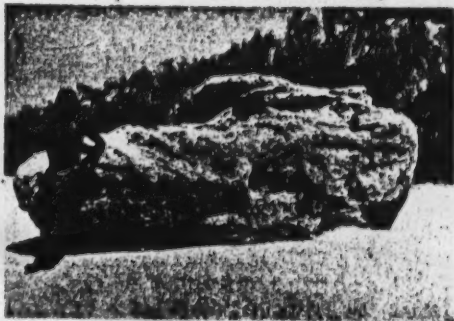
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PLATE 91. Totem places and sand figures, Yirrkalla

- A Casuarina tree, Jalboa
- C Sand drawing, goannas
- E Cliff at Jalboa

- B Fig tree, Jalboa
- D Sand figure, fish
- F White stones, milarik, Jalboa

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[41]



B



D



A



C

PLATE 97. Totem places, Jalboa

- A The turtle rock, Al-aika
- C Totem rock of canoe

- B Totem rocks of turtle carapace
- D Totem rocks of dismembered turtle

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After performing the dance of the tiger make, *dunbania*, they each painted the death mark of the make on their faces³ and cast their spears at the sleeping man. These passed through both his chest and carrying-bag, killing him instantly. [532* 773 116 302 628]

The two brothers, waiting until the wives of *Djunmundia* returned from food-gathering, captured them and, putting them aboard the canoe, paddled to an island north of Bremer Island. During the night, however, the women escaped, swam to the mainland, and told the *Bukalatji*,⁴ relatives of the murdered *Djunmundia*, how their husband had been murdered. When the two brothers discovered their loss they returned to their camp on Bremer Island.

During the next few days the *Bukalatji* worked hard making a number of bark canoes. Waiting until there was no moon, they launched them and paddled to Dambalia. Leaving their canoes to the north of the island, the *Bukalatji* crept through the low scrub to surround and kill *Tjuna-tjuna* and *Wururunga*. But the brothers heard them and, in their flight, came by chance on the bark canoes, which they started to cut to pieces with the large steel knives which the Malays had given them. They had almost finished their work of destruction when the head man of the *Bukalatji* came up and begged them not to destroy his own canoe, so that he could take all of his people home. The brothers relented and allowed the *Bukalatji* to depart. [507 77]

After some time the two brothers left Bremer Island and went to live near Cape Wilberforce, where they met and married two women from the nearby islands. The wives were out collecting oysters one day when the *Bukalatji* again attacked the brothers and this time succeeded in killing them. This so enraged the women that they attacked the *Bukalatji* with the knives belonging to their husbands and killed them all. *Tjuna-tjuna* and *Wururunga* were then transformed into goannas and their camps on Bremer Island into trees. Between those trees there is a path, which must be kept clean by the local aborigines. [823]

On Pl. 98A the two brothers, at *a*, are paddling their canoe to the mainland. On the left, at *b*, they are holding their spear-throwers and avenging spears in their hands. The elder brother, *Tjuna-tjuna*, is on the right. At *c* is their enemy, *Djunmundia*, transfixed by the two avenging spears, one of which has passed through both his chest and his carrying-bag (cross-hatched oval). In the lower right panel *d*, black circles enclosing the goannas are totemic trees mentioned in the myth; the parallel lines, the path between them; and the curves, nearby sand-hills.

The Man, Balonarati, and the Paper-bark Trees of Matamataui [178 133 131]

Between Trial and Caledon Bays is a river, Gaimmaui. Near this river is the Matamataui swamp,⁵ about half a mile across and filled with paper-bark trees.

3. The death mark, shown on the carved and painted head of *Banaramin*, Pl. 139D. It is painted on the faces of all the men who take part in an avenging ceremony.

4. These are the mythical people who killed *Muruna*, the fisherman. See Pl. 96D.

5. This swamp is also mentioned in the myth of the three men and the bush-fire. Pl. 93B.

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dulwar. This is the totemic place of the mythical man *Balonarati* and the paper-bark trees.

During the early days of the world *Balonarati* invented the method of preparing *nutu* from the fruit of the cycad⁶ so that it would be fit for human consumption. *Balonarati* first broke the shells, pounded the kernels into flour, placed the flour in a finely-woven basket and soaked the food for three days in running water to remove the poison. At the end of that time he stripped sheets of paper-bark⁷ from the adjacent trees and taking the sodden flour from the water, wrapped it in the paper-bark and allowed it to drain for several hours. After this treatment the flour was ready to eat. *Balonarati*'s invention, still in use, ensures a plentiful food supply for the aborigines. The place where the mythical man prepared the cycad flour, *nutu*, is now a swamp filled with large paper-bark trees, some of them still bearing the marks where *Balonarati* stripped the bark from them.

Two bark paintings, although somewhat similar in design, illustrate different aspects of the same myth.

On Pl. 98C,⁸ the transverse bands *a* and *b* are sand-banks on the River Gaimanui, and *c* the main track between the north and the south of Caledon Bay. The lozenges are the paper-bark trees in the swamp, and the dots on the ends of the lozenges, fine white dust in the bark which the wild bees collect and carry to their hives. The cross-hatching indicates the pieces of bark lying about the base of the tree after the stripping is finished.

Plate 98B represents an individual tree at Matamataui. The lozenges on the upper and lower panels indicate places on the trunk from which *Balonarati* had stripped the bark, and the dots, like those on the previous painting, the white dust which the bees take to their hives. The cross-hatched bands surrounding the two panels indicate the upper part of the tree which the mythical man, being unable to reach, could not strip of its bark.

The Man, Rualko, and the Turtle, Muratu-muratu, at Cape Shield

The *jiritja* man *Rualko* lived, during mythical times, on the beach at Cape Shield. He ate only the eggs of turtles and sea-birds.

On Pl. 98D the central panel is the track of the female turtle, *muratu-muratu*, the herring-bone design being the marks she made in the sand as she crawled from the water to lay her eggs. The inner oval at *b* is the sand disturbed by the turtle in the preparation of her nest, and the dots in the outer oval her eggs. On his way to the turtle nest (see footmarks, panel *c*), *Rualko* collected the eggs (dots in panel *c*) which the four black seagulls had laid on the path. His returning footmarks are shown in panel *d*. The horizontal groups of wavy lines *e, e, e*, are the marks made in the sand by the sand-crabs, *gunjun*, and the semicircles

6. This fruit is poisonous if eaten in its raw state.

7. Paper bark, being particularly soft and flexible, is used for a wide variety of purposes. [314]

8. Interpretation by F. D. McCarthy.

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patterns, the comb of a hive of wild bees, associated in some undefined way with the tortoises. 532*

Fish and Eggs

Plate 126B refers to the spawn and developing young of an unidentified fish which lives in the swamps south of Milingimbi. The dotted lines symbolize the developing fish, and the sloping lines between, the spawn.

The Kangaroo-man, Gardjambal

Plate 126C belongs to Nulwadjbir, situated on the southern end of Buckingham Bay, the totemic place of the kangaroo-man, *Gardjambal*, who is shown seven times in this painting. The design at the bottom of the right-hand panel is the stone axe of the kangaroo-man; the remaining ovals are his tracks. 773* 532* 778 823

The Serpent-men, Jurlungur and Gadjalun

Plate 126D pictures the two serpent-men, *Jurlungur* (upside down) and *Gadjalun*, creators of the country of Mirrimina.⁶⁸ Each mythical man is wearing a tall leather head-dress. To the right of both *Jurlungur* and *Gadjalun* are their spear-throwers, spears and wooden trumpets.

The Two Sisters, Minal and Wann-wann

Plate 127A pictures two mythical women, *Minal* and *Wann-wann*,⁶⁹ in their bark hut at Djimba, a place in a jungle near the Gardji swamp. This swamp is on the mainland south of Milingimbi. The long panel in the middle of the bark painting is the central pole supporting the bark hut. Within this pole there is a hive of wild bees, the dots representing the bees and the honeycomb. The two women, *Minal* and *Wann-wann*, with their hands upraised, are at the top of the painting. The remaining designs were not explained.

Unidentified Totem, Galdar

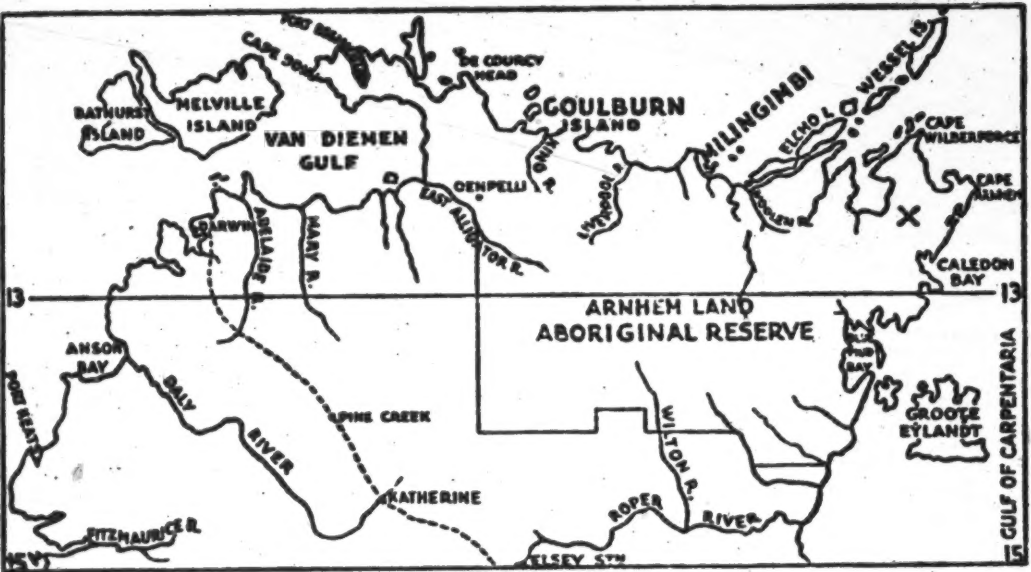
Plate 127B pictures a totemic place, Budjala, in eastern Arnhem Bay, which belongs to an unidentified totemic creature, called *galdar*. At some time during the creation period *galdar* struck a rock at Budjala, causing so much water to flow that it overwhelmed two men who were guarding some sacred objects. The ancestral people swam to an island, where they rested until the flood had subsided. 823 778

The four lines of lozenges, *a, a*, represent the running water, and the three transverse panels, *b, b, b*, the sand-banks in the stream. The four rectangles with the projections at each end are the sacred objects. There was no explanation for the fish.

68. It was the serpent, *jurlungur*, which swallowed one of the Wawalik sisters at the Mirrimina waterhole, see myth, p. 275, and Warner (1937), p. 250. Warner places this waterhole on the Glyde River. The Rev. Ellicott's informants say that Mirrimina is an extensive swamp between the Wollen and Buckingham Rivers. Both Warner and Ellicott, however, place the waterhole in the same clan area, Uulaamali. 133

69. The Rev. Ellicott considers these two women are similar to the Bawalik sisters. See Warner (1937), p. 250; and myth, p. 276.

THE ABORIGINES OF EAST ARNHEM LAND

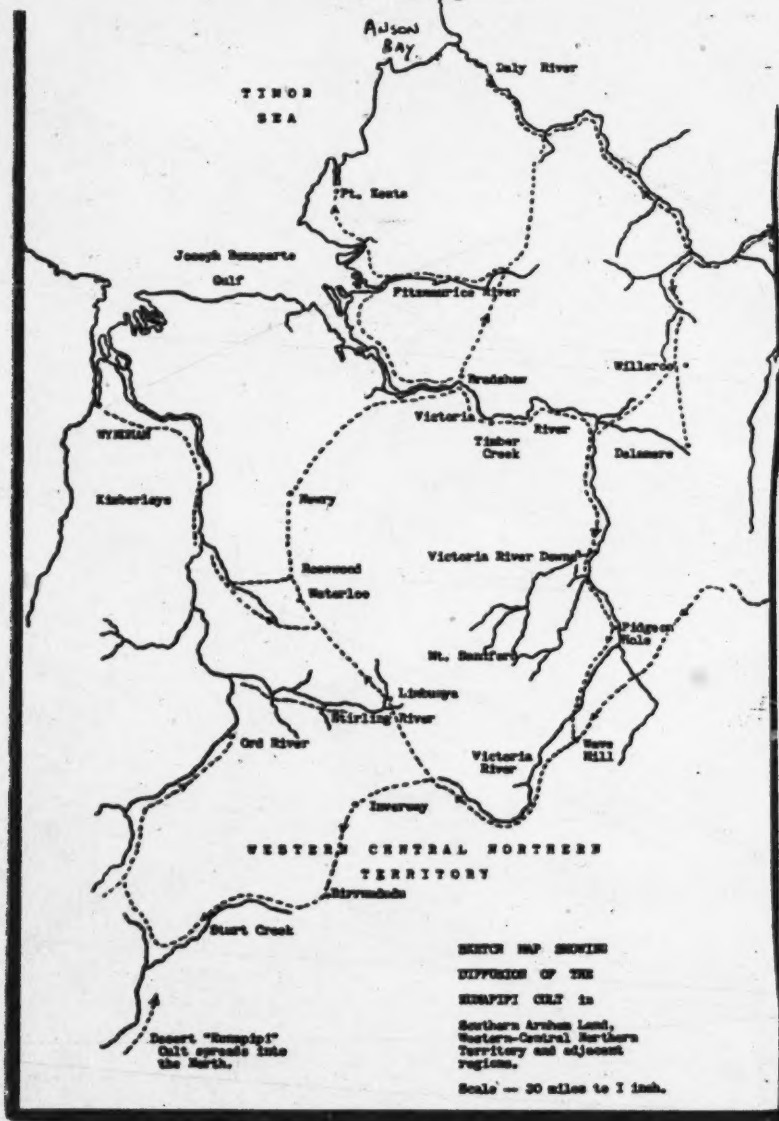


X Proposed New Methodist Station
 Present Stations: Darwin, Goulburn Island, and Milingimbi

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951

O117 Murngin O117

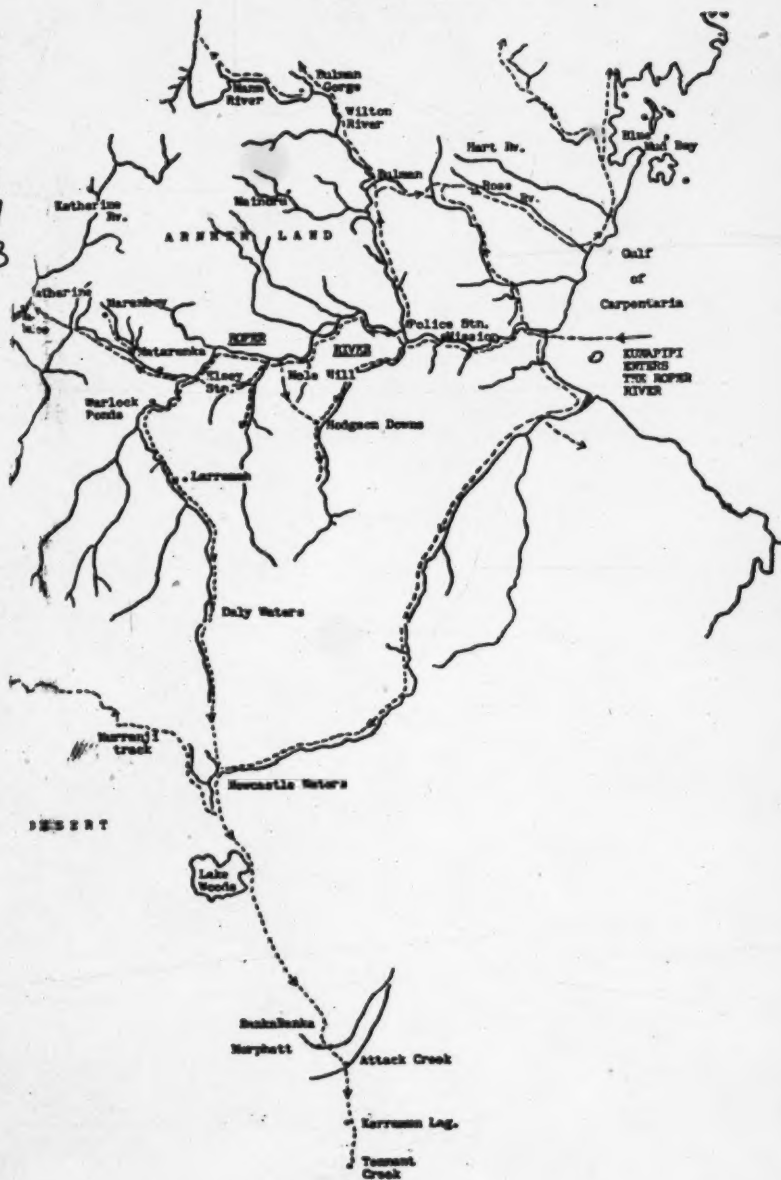
102
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177
773



[Front End Map (A)]

OI17 Murngin OI17

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$$[Front\ End\ Map(B)]$$

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951

OI17 Murngin OI17

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[for captions, see category 116, p. x]

PLATE II.

[Facing p. xxxii]

CHAPTER I

THE CULTURAL PATTERN OF NORTH-
EASTERN ARNHEM LAND SOCIETY*a. The Geographical Background:*

The main centre with which we shall be dealing here is Yirrkalla, 131 in the far north-eastern corner of the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve. The surrounding area is thickly wooded, with jungles and mangrove swamps, fresh water streams and tidal rivers, long beaches broken by sheer cliffs, and occasional islands fairly close to the shore. 133 137

Yirrkalla itself takes its name from a fresh water creek that flows into the surf beside a long white curving beach. This creek drains a wide area of lagoon and swamp, its source far back in the hilly inland. Wide grass flats, easily inundated during the monsoonal rains, and dense jungles, lie in the back country not too far from the coast line. At Yirrkalla the Methodist Overseas Mission established a station some eleven years ago: and now a Mission house on a low cliff dominates the beach, where native huts, mostly of cast-off European timber and tin, are arranged in rows. Beyond the Mission house, on a smaller beach, are other huts; and a church, store-house, dispensary and garden complete the settlement. 103 132 797 342 177

This Mission station is the centre for natives whose traditional home camps are at Blue Mud Bay, Trial and Caledon Bays and Port Bradshaw to the south, facing the Gulf of Carpentaria, while visitors come from Groote Eylandt, Woodah Island and Rose River. The Yirrkalla local groups belong mainly to Cape Arnhem, Bremer Island, Melville Bay, and the English Company Islands, as well as to Arnhem Bay: but natives from the Wessel and Eleho Islands, Milingimbi in the Crocodile Islands, and from the mainland to the west, do visit this region. Yirrkalla is thus a strategic base for anthropologists and missionaries who desire to contact members of various groups of a more or less similar cultural and linguistic background. 131 797 122

Geographically speaking, the Yirrkalla groups are comparatively isolated, for to-day only the Mission lugger calls at this depot, with occasional visits by other Europeans who come by boat and plane. Yirrkalla is approximately 500 sea-miles east of Darwin, 130 miles

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951

O117 Murngin O117

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PLATE XVI

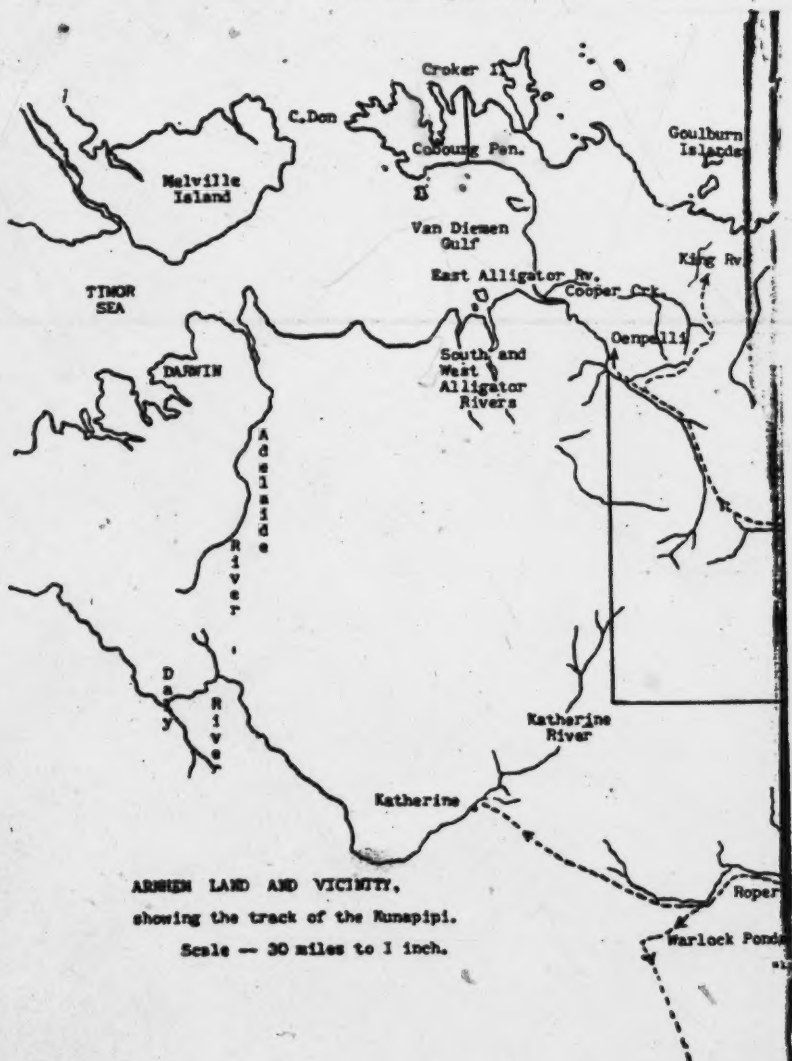
[p. 84(G)]

[For captions see category 116, p. XIII]

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951

OH17 Murrngin OH17

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ARNHEM LAND AND VICINITY,
showing the track of the Rumapipi.

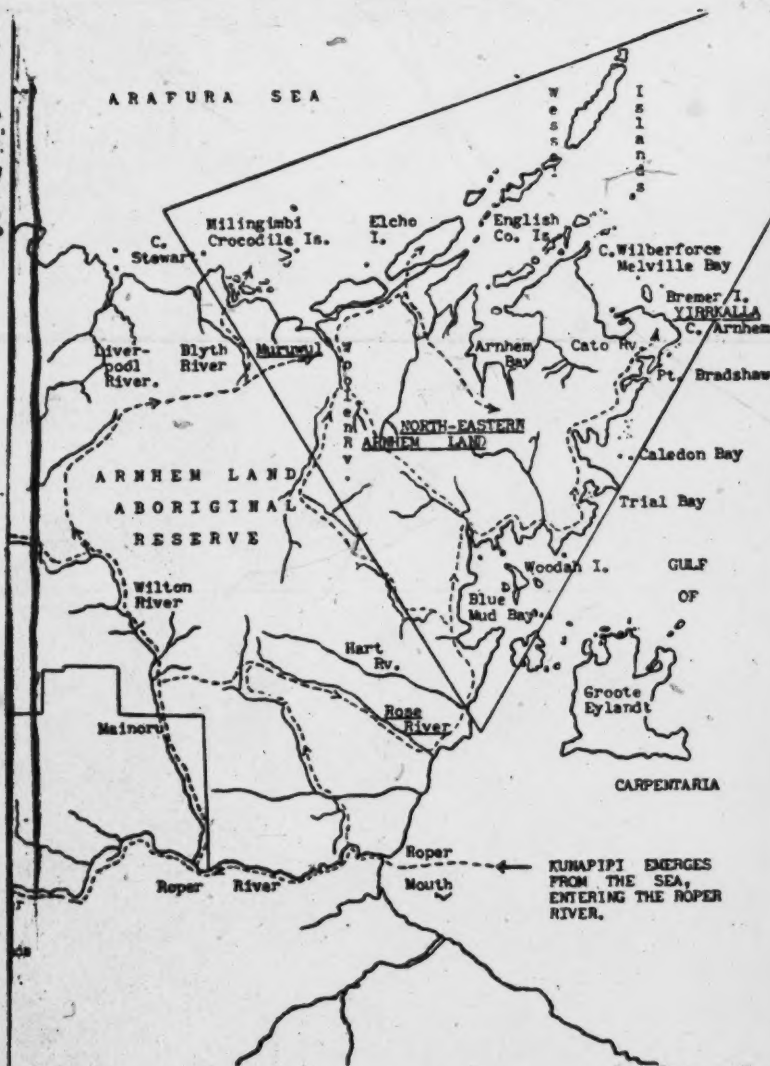
Scale — 30 miles to 1 inch.

[Back End Map (A)]

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951

OI17 Murngin OI17

102
131
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[Back End Map(B)]

8: Berndt E-5 (1946-1950) 1954

OI17 Murngin OI17

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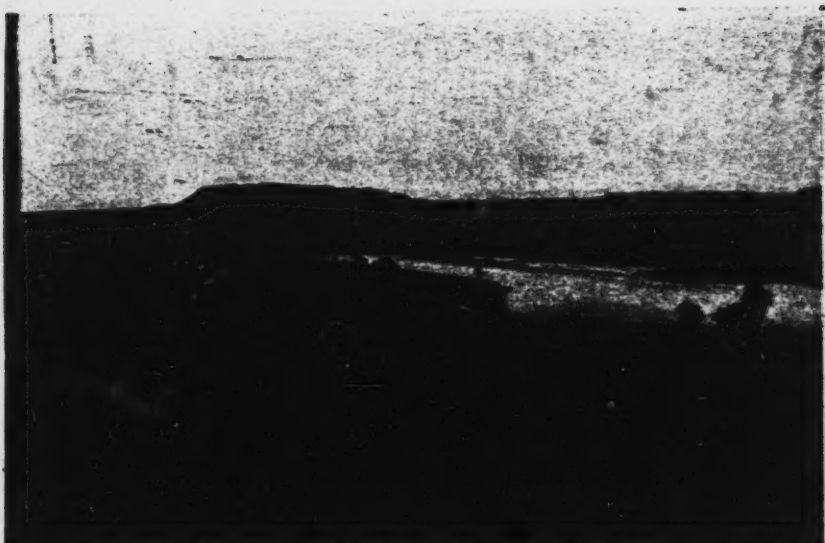
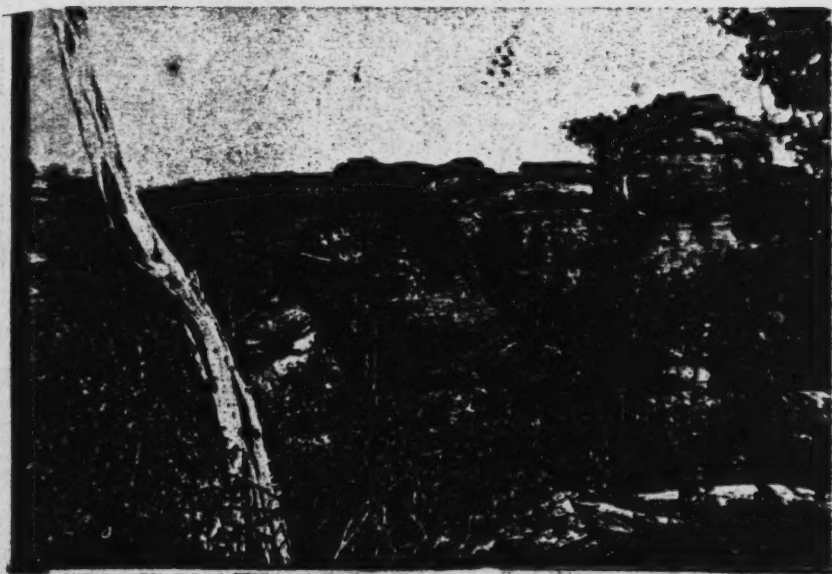


Plate 4a: Oenpelli Hill, with Gunbalanya billabong.

Plate 4b: Towering rocks behind the Oenpelli Mission.



[p. 25(A)]

57 *opposition* between groups, which, in the absence of some
619 powerful motive or urge, must tend to restrict communication between people who are situated at any distance from one another.

133 Let us consider, first, the country and its natural resources. Arnhem Land is a vast territory, still in its virgin state. The terrain is rugged. There are no high mountains but only low hills, which, except on the western fringe, rarely exceed four or five hundred feet in height. These hills, which often outcrop with bare rock, give an arid, even desolate, appearance to the country. Undulating lowlands and broad plains
[137] stretch for hundreds of miles. These are more fertile, and are covered either with a dense growth of long grass or with savannah woodland. They are intersected by numerous watercourses, which in the dry season become mere dry ravines with a few deep waterholes. In the wet season these river courses are raging torrents.

813 The natives are familiar with the various botanical (eco-
824 logical) associations which characterise this territory, and distinguish these by special terms. They can name, without hesitation, the characteristic trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants in every association, as well as the food plants and animals, and the raw materials used in technology, which at any season of the year¹² they obtain from each of these associations. In this we see a system and an orderliness

¹² Some idea of the critical knowledge of their territory and its resources which the Australian aborigines possess, and of the systematic way in which they classify these resources, as well as their appreciation of the influence of the seasonal cycle on their life and economy, may be gathered from the following accounts of the people of the neighbouring territory of Cape York Peninsula:

Names and Naming in the Wik Mungkan Tribe (in press) and *The Seasonal Factor in Human Culture*, Proc. Prehist. Soc. July-Dec. 1939, No. 10, pp. 209-221.

which is very far removed from the general picture of the Australian aborigine.

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As the coast is approached, the country often becomes flat, and takes the form of wide plains through which the rivers flow sluggishly. On their estuarine reaches the rivers break up into innumerable arms, creeks and backwaters which are fringed with dense walls of mangroves. These brackish tidal reaches intersect the coastal plains, which are periodically flooded, becoming shallow lagoons which soon dry up, and leave miles of bare mud. This dries out and cracks so that it presents a tessellated appearance, and is often encrusted with deposits of salt. The estuarine reaches, tidal arms, and flood plains, yield very large quantities of food—chief of which are fish, for the capture of which many very specialised methods have been developed in Arnhem Land. Shellfish (*maipal*), including *laitjin*, (the wood-boring shipworm, *Teredo*) are also obtained in quantity in the mangrove zone. The shellfish are gathered at low water and *Teredo* are extracted from sodden logs uncovered at low tide, by splitting these with an axe and pulling them out by hand.

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There are two well-defined seasons in Arnhem Land, the wet, or north-west monsoon, and the dry or south-east season. The "wet" extends from about December to March or April, when the wind is generally in the north-west quarter. During this period most of the annual rainfall—about 40 inches—occurs. The "dry" season extends from about April to November. At this season little rain falls except in far North-eastern Arnhem Land and for much of this period the wind blows steadily from the south-east.

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This division of the year into two strongly-contrasted seasons has an important influence not only on the food supply of the people but also on their movements and occu-

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221 pations, and therefore, on the nature of their camps and
 805 house types. It may be noted in passing that the seasonal
 813 influence on their lives and occupations is well appreciated
 by the natives themselves, and that they divide the annual
 cycle into six or more phases or seasons which they name
 from the winds, the weather conditions, or from the food
 supplies which characterise them. And again, they will
 name these phases, and state without hesitation the appropriate
 occupational sites at each of them, and their activities
 and food supplies which depend upon these seasonal conditions,
 with an insight and a precision that no white man who is not a
 trained ecologist and well versed in botany and zoology, could
 approach.

- [133] During the wet season the river courses rise quickly and
 221 soon overflow their banks so that the country is flooded for
 [137] miles. The grass, especially on the plains, grows rank and
 342 high—often more than six feet—and the people are concentrated
 361 in semi-permanent wet season camps in which the population may
 exceed one hundred. Here they lead an almost sedentary existence
 in contrast with their active nomadic life in the south-east season.
 At this time they construct houses, sometimes of large size—thatched
 with bark of tea-tree (*Melaleuca*) or of stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetro-*
 [355] *donta*). Some of these houses are well built and are provided
 [372] with sleeping platforms under which fires can be lighted as
 a protection against mosquitoes. They are also equipped with
 racks to carry food and utensils. Each house type has its own
 traditional form, type of construction and distinctive name, and
 is often developed in adaptation to a particular environment, or
 is determined by the building materials available in the vicinity.
 Nine or ten types of houses or shelters are recognised in
 Arnhem Land. These vary from simple breakwinds built on the
 windward side in the "dry"

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[End Map 1(B)]

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[End Map 1E]


$$[E_{\text{M}} \text{ Map } 1(D)]$$

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957

Oil7 Murngin Oil7



142
501
291
231

LANDFALL

Two Yulengor families in their dug-out canoes



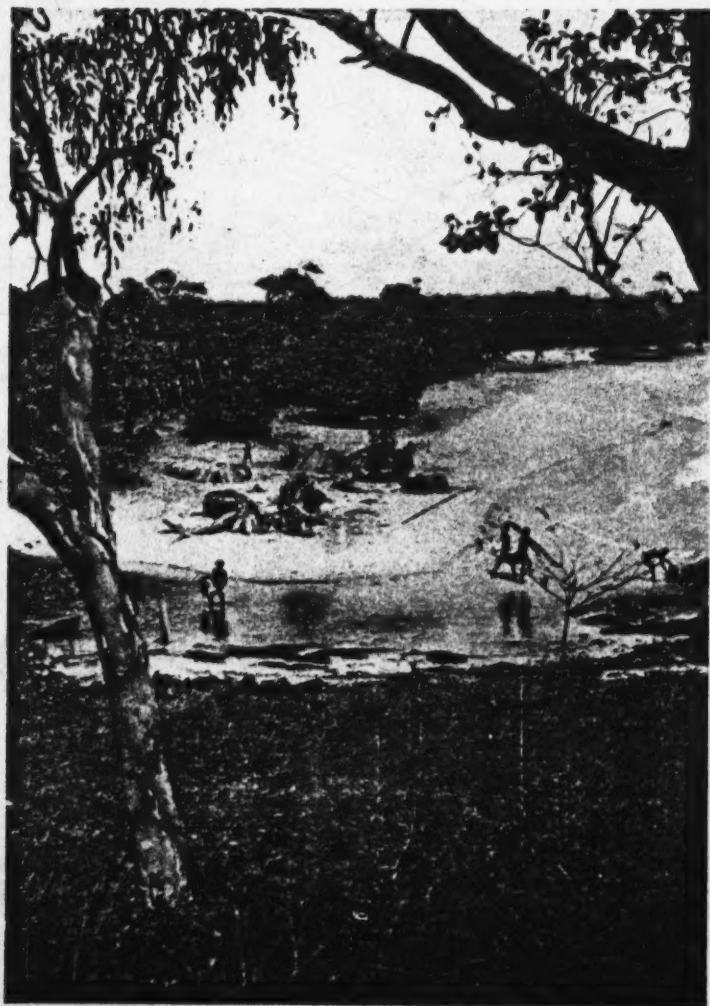
133

ARNHEM LAND BEACH

Imported cattle near Yirrkala station

[facing p6]

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
OII7 Murngin OII7



YIRRKALA

The creek after which the station was named

[facing p7]

CHAPTER TWO

Exploring

- 133 It has been called wildest Arnhem Land, and thousands of square miles of it have never been seen by civilized man. For months we combed its coastline, creeks, and valleys, searching for a site for the new station, but strange as it may seem, a suitable site was not discovered, although we had three hundred miles of coastline from which to choose. For that matter, I have never seen any site in Arnhem Land providing all the essentials for a self-supporting community. At least one requirement was always missing. When a rare pocket of rich jungle soil with palms, ferns, tangled vines, and tall shady trees was found, then the jungle was low-lying and useless as a building site. If an anchorage, where fresh water and building areas were ideal, then not a square foot of good soil was to be seen.

[132] Everything of value in the country has been eroded and washed into swamps or out to sea. That over thirty thousand square miles of it can be so desperately poor, and yet have an annual rainfall of from forty to seventy inches, puts the land in a class by itself. Sand-ridges, mangrove-swamps, and laterite headlands make it a monotonous coastline. Most swamps are impenetrable because of useless mangrove

[136] jungles, sheltering crocodiles, crabs, and flying foxes. Tree-climbing fish (*Periophthalmus*) swarm in salt-water jungles, and at the first sight of danger hop from the water to the roots and low branches of trees. Gravel headlands extend inland to low hills devoid of useful timber and grass. High mountains there are none, but in central Arnhem Land a sandstone plateau is lacerated by countless abysmal

EXPLORING

water-worn canyons—a wild, desolate region where only goannas find enough to eat and white cockatoos screech through the gorges. [133] [136]

Nevertheless, I found it fascinating to fly over this country—no one would toil through swamps and humid jungles if it were possible to fly over them in the coolness and comfort of a plane. Arnhem Bay is typical coastal country, low-lying and well-nigh impenetrable, but during the war years I grew accustomed to looking at it from R.A.A.F. Catalinas and watching its panorama unfold in a succession of meandering grass-choked creeks and swamps, with a narrow ribbon of jungle dividing them from the waters of the bay. White cockatoos circled over black clumps of jungle, white ibises fished in the shallow swamps, and egrets waded on the mudflats and made it appear like a garden of marguerites waving in the breeze. [136]

Even the weather is surprising, and the climate accounts for the poverty of the country. Seven or eight months of the year are cool; that is when the dry, south-east monsoon blows in from the Pacific. Wind and warm sun parch the ground and bush fires rage over the hills and sandy valleys, so that for weeks the sky is hidden in smoke haze and the setting sun is a blood-red ball. Yulengor start fires when hunting and cannot pass dry grass without firing it. It is a common practice for them to strip five or six feet of stringy bark from a tree, twist it into a stiff length, light one end and carry it like a walking stick, stabbing the fiery end into dry grass by the side of the track. 372

By October the winds are calm, humus has been licked up by the fires, a burning sun completes the destruction, and the country is a barren ash-heap. December brings a change in the wind and, heavily laden with moisture, it blows in from the north-west, flooding the country with torrential rain of from forty to seventy inches. Its immediate effect on dried-out Arnhem Land is devastating, as loose soil, sand, ash, and [134] [132]

YULENGOR

177 appreciate it, particularly during their New Year festivals,
262 but nomads will not eat the product, and their half-starved dingoes turn from it.

648 At Caledon Bay we walked over the scene of the then recent Japanese massacre. In 1933 the Asiatics came to fish for bêche-de-mer, and nomads told me that they landed near the aboriginal camp and went from one family to another offering handfuls of tobacco in return for women. Tobacco makes an almost irresistible appeal to nomads, but they surlily refused to trade, though the tobacco so tantalizingly near made them moody and irritable. Trouble was still brewing some days later, when the Japanese established their camp and employed nomads to collect firewood for the trepang fires. It is said that an Asiatic threw a piece of damper at a Yulengor for refusing to work, and thereby brought the trouble to a head; for even if they are desperately poor, nomads are extremely sensitive to a slight. Their spears were hidden in the sand, and they speared the Japanese so that only one escaped by diving into the sea and swimming to a nearby headland. Spears punctured the surface as he swam underwater, but he out-witted his pursuers by ingeniously breaking the head off a spear and clasping it under his arm as he fled into the bush. His ruse worked, and pursuing Yulengor said: 'Leave him, he has the spear through him and will soon be dead.' Days later, he arrived at Milingimbi, two hundred miles away, lacerated, exhausted and naked, and missionaries later took him to Darwin. He took the first boat to Japan.

797 No suitable site for a station could be found in Caledon Bay, so we returned to Yirrkala near Cape Arnhem. It had an exposed anchorage and poor soil, but it also had fresh water, an elevated building-site and clean beaches. We decided to establish the station there.

By the middle of November, timber had been cut and

YULENGOR

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 [133] Lagoons overflow in the wet season and hundreds of acres
 [222] of low-lying land are under water. It is country where water-
 [252] lilies grow in profusion. Women dive for the root-stocks
 and roast great quantities of them. Lily seed-pods are eaten
 raw, sieved through network dilly-bags, or ground between
 stones and baked into cakes.

The most palatable of all vegetable food is probably the
 [137] corm or swamp rush, 'rarkai', and these swamps are famous
 [222] throughout Arnhem Land. Rarkai rushes cover brackish
 swamps near the coast, and women systematically turn over
 many acres of black mud in their search for the nut. In east
 Arnhem Land I know of several such swamps, each of which
 [361] supported a hundred or even two hundred Yulengor for six
 [796] weeks at a time. During the corm season the hordes make the
 swamps a rendezvous for corroborees, ceremonies, and initia-
 [574] tions. Corms are about the size of marbles, and in addition
 to being the most nutritious of all their vegetable foods they
 possess a pleasant nutty flavour.

[771] Several foods have totemic significance and find a place
 in ceremonial practices. Probably the most important of
 these is 'ngutu', the nut of the cycad palm, and it is said that
 this yellowish brown nut was first eaten by spirit-Ancestors,
 [773] who instructed their daughters in the art of preparing it.
 [462] Legend declares that as the knowledge was received first by
 [222] women, they have for all time to attend to the gathering
 and cooking of all vegetable foods.

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 252 Hard-shelled cycad nuts are cracked between stones, and
 the kernels soaked in water for three or even five days. Most
 of the poison is thus leached out, and the pulp is wrapped in
 bark and buried in hot sand over which a fire is lit. Cycad
 meal can be baked into flat coarse cakes that sometimes
 weigh up to fifteen pounds, that keep for days, and can be
 carried long distances for use at ceremonial gatherings.
 [574] 'Ngutu' has sustaining properties, and Yulengor live on it
 for weeks as they prepare for inter-tribal corroborees.

YULENGOR

192 and a school-teacher becomes 'rorm-gurrpan-a-mirry'.
 [197] Aboriginal dialects are picturesque, and the same terms are used for objects possessing some similarity; thus, twenty or more names for parts of the body are used for trees and geographical formations. A backbone is the same as a mountain chain; the nose on men, animals, and fish is the same as a peninsular, a cape, or the bow of a boat or canoe; arms, wings, limbs of trees, and tributary streams are all called 'werrna'. A main river stream is called throat. Wounds and sores are classed with holes in utensils, canoes, huts, or clothing.

When human conditions resemble natural phenomena, this process is reversed, and the adjective blunt, 'dumuk', is used for a bush track through thick scrub; a man, too, may be 'blunt' or dull of hearing or intellect and understanding; the word is also in everyday use to describe a blunt axe or knife. Hollow logs or burial posts are 'dupun', and in a mild form of abuse a nomad may be called 'dupun' or empty-headed.

103 Scores of appropriate place-names occur throughout the country, but it is not surprising that there are also hundreds of other euphonious names having no particular significance, for along the coast and on the countless bush tracks, every waterhole, swamp, hill, river crossing, and ancient camp site has a name. 'Rungi' could be a falling tide, low tide, or an exposed beach, and there are many coastal names linked with rungi. West Arnhem Land is known for its low lying swamps and mudflats, but in the north-east there is a startling change to clean, sandy beaches with bold headlands, and the latter area is called 'Rungi-Poingar'—'the place of beaches'. Most camps are made on beaches or sandy patches in the bush, but a horde in Blue Mud Bay haunts an outcrop of stone and clay far out on a mangrove mud flat, and consequently their camp is known as 'Lokor-Poingar'—'the place of feet'; and the reference is to the spreading mangrove roots or feet.

LANGUAGES, SIGNS AND SMOKE-SIGNALS

From Cape Wilberforce to Arnhem Bay the ruggedness of the coastline is exceeded only by the precipitous bluffs of the English Company's Islands near by, and the whole area is known as 'Bwartaba' or 'rocky country', 'wartaba' being the name for rocks. Cape Grey is a prominent headland in the Gulf of Carpentaria and is called 'Bokorral', 'bokor' referring to the cliff-face and also to the human forehead. 103 [133]

Names for birds are sound-perfect imitations of bird calls. A crow is known by the raucous 'warrk', and native-companions making a noise resembling a low-toned gargle are called 'gorral-kor'. The brown pheasant calls pleasantly on several clipped notes and is known as 'bukbuk'. 192

Pithy sayings are in common use, and the best known have English equivalents. 'Mata-rang' is a man who never wanders far from his horde territory, or, when infrequently visiting distant friends, is for ever anxious to return home; literally he is a stick-in-the-mud. The term is also given to an adolescent who finds his mother's company preferable to that of boys of his own age and who follows her when she hunts for food. 195

If a man comes into a friendly camp and wishes to pass on important news, he waits for a lull in the conversation, and remarks cryptically: 'When the tide goes out, have a look on the beach and you will find something.' His hearers are instantly alert and make an opportunity for him to tell his story. There seem to be trouble-makers in every camp, with their accusations, rumours, and quarrels, and in exasperation they may be told to 'Get out and camp by yourself till the wind cleans your hair'. 521 [578]

Stone Age man has an extensive sign-language or semi-ology, and I accumulated a vocabulary of over two hundred simple signs for common customs, names, questions, instructions, and relationships. Sign-terms are generally imitations of the subject referred to; when making the sign 201

15: Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936) 1957

OII7 Murngin OII7

342



YULENGOR HUT

Such a hut was used by the two women in Creation days

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THE POOL OF AMBIJ

[paeing p151]